

Another Kind of Hunt

I love deer hunting. It's one of my favorite things to do. It isn't something I grew up doing. It's something I learned about 16 years ago, when I met my husband and partner in life. We went west together, and he taught me the basics on a Montana prairie; the same Montana prairie that my people homesteaded on.

It came as something of a shock to me when we got home to Minnesota and he was not inclusive towards me in his deer hunting. He explained to me that deer hunting isn't for women. Women should be the camp cook, if they are present on the scene at all, which they really shouldn't be. I didn't take that real well.

It's funny what you think is a big deal, that turns out really not to be anything at all. I spent a few years stewing over being excluded from my spouse's hunting party, but I didn't let it stop me from hunting. They built me a beautiful stand at home, big enough so that I could take my little girls out with me, because they were so young that they could not be left at home alone. That is where I learned even more about hunting, because I had to do it all myself. There was no one to look at in that sort of helpless way, the way we sometimes use to get someone else to do something for us. I needed to figure out how to shoot well, how to track when necessary, how to gut and retrieve a deer, how to bring it home. I learned how to butcher, which is a craft I got better at from raising my sheep for the freezer.

When I ran into more trouble than I could handle, my husband had a way of showing up and lending a hand. He did it without complaint, even when I did stupid things. The worst one, so far, was when I got the bobcat stuck trying to save myself some deer retrieval effort. Some machinery operators can use the bucket to get themselves out of such a situation. I used the bucket to push myself in so deep it took the neighbor's skidder to get me out. My foot was bad that year, and although it was heavily taped, I was having trouble walking. The darn deer still had to be drug out, and with my foot screaming at me, my daughter (by then a big, strong farm girl) ended up doing this work. I have become more efficient with these things over time, with practice, but I have made plenty of mistakes, too.

As my girls grew and became more independent, so did I. I no longer confined myself to my deer stand at home. As the opportunities developed, I left home and took my hunting to another level on the public lands of the Chippewa National Forest. And it became increasingly less important to me that I wasn't included in someone else's hunt, because I had a hunt of my own. It surprised me to develop a passion for this time spent alone. I found that I really didn't want to hunt with others, because I like to move at my own pace. I like to plan where I want to go, what country I want to see, what days I want to go on. I like to do it my way. My girls didn't really develop a desire to hunt, despite their early exposure to it, but occasionally one of them would want to go along for a nice walk in the woods and a little picnic with a fire, and I was glad to have them. But mostly, these times were just about me, and recalibrating with life.

My favorite way to hunt involves multiple tags. We have been spoiled in recent years, and I have gotten used to that way of doing things. I hunt opening weekend at home, in my stand, where I really have the best chance of getting something. Then later in the season, when many

people have gone back to their homes, I find that it's pretty easy to move around on public lands in the Chippewa without disturbing other folks' hunts. I call that my "walk around" time, and I feel most satisfied if I already have an animal hanging in the garage from opening weekend, another tag in my pocket, and plenty of chances for walk around time.

This year before the season began, I was feeling a little cheated by my DNR friends. There would be no walk around tag. Not only that, I did not even draw a doe tag. That seriously affects my chances of success. I believe I even complained out loud, to other people. I haven't seen a buck from my stand in several years, and I haven't missed them. I am a meat hunter, and my very favorite kind of venison is the tender, young kind. Let the others take the tough, stinky kind. My teacher always said to me, "you can't eat horns". Venison is a staple in our diet at my house.

So I wasn't expecting much as I sat in my stand on opening Saturday. I always go out very early in the morning, so that I can study the stars in the dark, and watch the light come. I think that is my very favorite part – the beautiful rosy glow the pines take on when the sun finally rises far enough to hit them. You sit there in the quiet, and the woods begin to come to life. The red squirrels come from their warm cavities in the trees, and it is as if each one is required to start the day with a loud chatter, announcing to the world that this is his spot and nobody better forget it. At dawn, you really get a feel for just how many red squirrels live close to your stand. And then the birds start in. I love how the chickadees come alive, flitting here and there and calling to one another. I get a thrill from watching the pileated woodpecker. As the sun builds, the hoar frost starts to drop from the trees, almost like snow. If I'm really lucky, some trumpeter swans will fly over. When the shooting starts, that is when the eagles will show up on the scene. Eagles love gut piles, and the ones that live in my neighborhood have learned to associate them with rifle shots. You see the most interesting things from a deer stand.

The deer stand is where I take time to think about life's trials. I mull them over in my mind, and sometimes I even ask for guidance. On more than one tough topic have I found peace from the perspective of my stand.

I was reflecting on past seasons while I sat in my stand in the dark on Saturday. It was one of those crisp, noisy mornings, where every sound is magnified. I heard movement, no doubt a deer, but assumed it was one of those does or fawns we see so much of near my home. I figured there wasn't much sense in worrying about that. Over the course of an hour in the dark, you could hear the animal feeding here and there.

Somehow after the light came I was surprised to watch a buck move into an open spot, and I barely got my shot off in time. And so it was that by 8 a.m., what should have been a two week long season for me came to an end. I knew better than to pass up the shot, because there is no guarantee there will be another one, but I wasn't overjoyed that it happened so quickly. So I got to thinking about how to extend my season, because hunting, at least for me, isn't primarily about shooting. Don't get me wrong. I love the feel of my rifle when I pull it up to my shoulder. I like to see the deer drop. I like to do my job well. But it's all the other stuff that goes along with hunting that I thought I would miss in this short season.

That is how I came to drag the deer to a place to gut it, where I would be able to see the gut pile from my deer stand. I knew the birds would be in to visit. Not just eagles, but crows, ravens, magpies, chickadees, nuthatches, and grey jays. My idea was that I would go in for breakfast, and return with my camera. Only by the time I got back, the pile was gone. Nothing left but some greens. The birds were that hungry.

The next morning I got up early and took my camera to my stand, thinking I would watch the sun come. I got surprised again. As it turns out, a camera is not enough to cause me to sit very long in the stand. I need more.

So I devised a walk around plan. It involved my favorite places, a grouse tag, and my .22, so that my shoulder would not feel too empty. I could put a little camera in my pocket, just in case. You may ask, why not a shot gun? It's because I'm only good with rifles; not so much with shot guns. And I didn't even take my dog, because deer season is not really the time of year that a brown dog should be running through the woods.

Armed in this fashion, I found a perfect day for a slow walk in a pretty place in the Marcell Moraine. Hilly country, you can follow a trail way down to the bottom and encounter any number of interesting things. Up at the top is aspen cutover, good for deer and grouse. Along the way down, the timber type grades into northern hardwoods, including some big, old craggy yellow birch. There's a moisture gradient along the way, and the lichens and mosses growing on the trees and ground are beguiling on a grey day. More than one photo was shot. Towards the bottom is this blending of decadence and youth. The carpet of young balsam fir reaches for the sky as the old fir and birch fall out of the stand. And at the very bottom the ground is too wet to walk on except in fall, when you can move carefully between high spots. There it is you will find the pitcher plants mixed amongst the sphagnum. In a funny twist, the grouse I found down at the bottom, not at the top.



How did I fare with the .22? Not as well as I did with the camera, owing to the fact that lichens and mosses are less jumpy than are grouse at this time of year. Still, I had an overwhelming sense of satisfaction with the day.

As I reflect on my little story, I think that probably this is not your typical kind of hunt. It's not even my typical kind of hunt. But to my friends at the DNR, I would like to say thank you for yet another fine deer season. As it

turns out, I don't really need to have either a walk around tag or an antlerless permit in order to enjoy November.

To my teacher I would like to say thank you so very, very much for opening my life to this delightful pastime. Thank you for showing me the ropes, and encouraging me to try. And most of all, thank you for helping me to find my way to doing it on my own. Those hours in the woods are some of the very best hours of my life. Aren't we fortunate to be in a place where we can do these kinds of things, in the heart of the Chippewa National Forest? Being surrounded by undeveloped, public lands open to all for their use is such an amazing blessing.

And to those of you who have not yet tried such ventures, I would just like to say do not be afraid. You are not too old to pick up something new. And by the way, it's not true that deer hunting is just for men. Women can do it, too.

Submitted by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
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